

Review/Interview by Girish Shahane
Director: Dev Benegal
Producer: Anuradha Parikh
Screenplay: Farrukh Dhondy
Now playing in India.
Soon to be released in the U.S. and U.K.

Dev Benegal's *Split Wide Open*, his second feature, is undoubtedly a groundbreaking effort. The film exposes the seamy, as well as the steamy, side of Bombay through an uncompromising and, sometimes, bitter narrative. It suggests that a snake's pit of incest, pedophilia, and rape lurks behind the façade of respectability presented by affluent urban Indians. Coming at a time when everybody seems to be looking at India's future through rose-tinted spectacles, *Split Wide Open* is a salutary reminder of all that is horribly wrong in India's stratified cities.

The main character in the film is KP (played by Rahul Bose), a small-time hoodlum working for the water-mafia. The water-mafia? Never heard of it? Well, Bombay and most other cities in India are covered with slums for the poor and illegal high-rises for the rich. Water-connections for these are obtained through bribes to municipal officers. But there's a flourishing trade in water supplied by tanker, and the tanker owners try to prevent citizens from receiving water through the mains. KP efforts to make some money for himself on the side is discovered by his boss. Soundly thrashed for his rebellion, KP also loses touch with his little adopted sister, towards whom he feels extremely protective. His search for the girl leads him to avenues that are also being explored by a high-profile talk show entitled, *Split Wide Open*. Nandita Mehta (Laila Rouass), the host of *Split Wide Open*, strikes up a friendship with KP and joins him in his search. He is on the lookout for emotional bonds and she is seeking another scoop. In a conversation with A&C's Girish Shahane, Dev Benegal spoke about the evolution of *Split Wide Open* and its reception so far...

Dev Benegal, Director of *Split Wide Open*

Girish: In your first feature film, *English, August*, the protagonist, a young IAS officer named Agastya Sen, is posted to a small-town called Madna. Agastya is a complete outsider, but in the course of the film he builds up certain emotional connections with his environment. *Split Wide Open* seems to follow an opposed trajectory: You begin with the hustler KP, who seems to be the complete insider, he has everything under control, and then you explore how he is progressively alienated from his surroundings. Were you conscious of this reversal?

Dev: Yes. The two films are very different in terms of form and style, obviously, but in a way one is the inverse of the other. *English, August* was, to begin with, an auto-critique of myself and of my generation. It grew out of my experiences making documentaries down south. I went to these places to make a film and didn't understand the language and had to work through interpreters. I began to question the whole issue of identity. We say we are all part of one country, but what does that actually mean? We are completely different from state to state, a little like Europe. So *English, August* was the journey of this guy who comes from a privileged background and goes into small-town India and realizes that he really doesn't know very much about what's going on. And in *Split Wide Open* it's really the other way round. *English, August* looks from the top

down, as it were, while Split Wide Open works from the bottom up, from the streets to the world of satellite television for example.

I was very clear that I wanted to make a connection between the two films. In fact a very obvious thread linking the two is water. In English, August one of the turning points in the life of Agastya Sen is when he decides he wants to give up inaction. He attempts to get water to a village where there is a well that has dried up: a lot like what is happening right now in Gujarat with the drought. But Agastya is thwarted by government officials who say, “ these people have not had water for years, why are you bothered”.

And the modern day bhishti (water-carrier), who is Agastya Sen trying to bring water to the village becomes, in Split Wide Open, a hustler who is selling Evian and is unlocking water-taps and is basically part of the water-mafia.

Girish: Speaking of connections, Split Wide Open has two major themes running through it. One is the theme of water and access to water and the other is sexuality in contemporary urban India. How did the two themes originate and how did you conceive of the connection between the two?

Dev: Three people collaborated on this venture from the start: Upamanyu Chatterjee; my wife Anuradha, who is also the producer of the film; and myself. Initially we wanted to make a sequel to English, August and then abandoned the idea. One of the things we came across at that time was the agony column, which had suddenly appeared in daily newspapers. And the content of the agony column was shocking, the letters were so explicit and the volume of those letters was staggering. We felt like this is really what’s going on, this is the change that’s taking place. And we said let’s make a movie about it.

We had to set it in an urban context and initially we went for Delhi but later settled on Bombay. Bombay is a city of extremes, it does hit you in that way. Just physically, it doesn’t let you go free. I remember around the time I first came to Bombay 20 years ago, I got lost and was walking near the Radio Club. I saw a line of women struggling to fill up buckets of water, and behind them was the expanse of the sea, and I found that very striking. Later, I realized the real problem of water in the city. So, when we were working on Split Wide Open, that was something I wanted to bring in. And the whole idea of water and sex, I think, these are two elements which sort of go hand in hand, linked directly to life.

Girish: To talk a little more about Bombay, how did you approach the depiction of the city?

Dev: The experience of a big city is not homogenous, it’s not unified, it’s not single, but it is very fragmented. Since the movie was to be about a city of extremes, one of the things the production designer (Anuradha, who also produced the film) and I did was to look at the extremes of the city rather than the clichéd images of Bombay. The idea was to look at the periphery, which reflected the theme of people being on the margins and being pushed out even further. We eventually found locations which were absolutely at the ends of the city: the place where KP and the little girl live is at the southern end of Bombay, a place called Dariya Nagar. And the priest (who is like KP’s foster-father) lives at the northern end of Bombay. The most important thing was to look at Bombay as a city bound by water. Bombay is not a city divided by a railway line, as many people think. Obviously, the British engineers who laid those tracks divided the city into east and west, but I always saw it as a city bound by water.

Girish: You start from the extremes, but even the lives at the center, so to speak, the lives of the affluent characters, have extreme situations just beneath the surface. So, it's as if nothing escapes the extremes, really.

Dev: Yes, we attempted to come in from the periphery and then look at the relationship that has with the life of the privileged.

Girish: The impression I came away with was of a city that is completely corrupt. The film seems quite pessimistic in that sense.

Dev: I think it's very dark certainly. Personally, when I step out in the city, I feel things have gone beyond any kind of remedy. Yet, at the same time I think it has a tremendous sense of energy. It has the ability to create a sense of hope in people. I consciously wrote this spirit into the end of the film, in the sense that all the characters in the film reinvent their life; everybody comes to terms with what's going on. I don't think that's necessarily positive. But, it's a tough city, no doubt about it.

Girish: And yet a section of the population, the class to which we belong, doesn't want to acknowledge this...

Dev: Absolutely. People just create these bubbles around themselves and are very secure, and they just don't see the life around them. A lot of the people who saw the movie told me, "this is not Bombay". And I said, "Well, it's not meant to be Bombay as such, it's meant to be any big city in India."

Girish: Three people are credited with work on the story and screenplay. Upamanyu Chatterjee, you, and also Farrukh Dhondy. What was Farrukh Dhondy's contribution to the project?

Dev: Upamanyu and I wrote about ten drafts of the screenplay and then he was posted to Paris. I wanted a stronger narrative element in the movie, because here were stories that were calling out for a narrative intervention. And I wanted to explore melodrama. In English, August the narrative is really backgrounded. But here I wanted a strong, foregrounded narrative and wanted to work with genre. I'd given Farrukh the script to read and we decided to have him write the final draft and he then wrote ten more drafts.

Girish: So, he added the thrust of the story?

Dev: Yes, I had wanted the story of the little girl to actually become a story, which in our drafts we weren't somehow able to crack and get at. Farrukh took a look at the script and suggested the way ahead. We had the idea of using a newspaper column and Farrukh suggested that we should make it a TV show. Of course, that led to the whole exploration of the role of the media, which transforms everything and everybody into bits of digital information. Also, the whole idea of the hustler came from him. He wanted KP to be a guy who sells drugs, but I said 'no', we want to do this water thing.

Girish: Speaking of KP's character, you must have had a reaction from many people, and I am certainly of this view, that Rahul Bose was a fine Agastya but is miscast as KP. He just doesn't sound right...

Dev: There's a small section of people who have been adamant about this, saying that Rahul was miscast. I think their point of reference is Bollywood, and that is misplaced. They have a romantic notion of the street hustler. KP's character certainly has elements of mainstream cinema, in the sense that he's not a nice guy, but he has this wonderful heart of gold.

In the course of researching the project we met a whole lot of people like KP and spoke to them about their dreams, their lives, their aspirations. And one of the things they said

was: Don't portray us as we are presented in a Bollywood film. They usually spoke some English, did not speak fluent Hindi. And my point to those who have critiqued Rahul's performance is: Find me a person in Bombay who speaks Hindi well. The men we met had a tremendous, desperate need to survive...a kind of animalistic quality to them. They weren't just soft or romantic or mellow; they were the kinds of people who would cut their losses and move on. And that kind of energy was what Rahul captured in his performance.

Girish: Now you're looking forward to the film's release in the United States and Britain. Do you expect different reactions there? That market must be crucially important, since your budget for Split Wide Open was over 1.5 million dollars, very high by Indian standards.

Dev: Obviously the international market is important, but the film's really done well here. It's opened like a mainstream movie, which perhaps was a little unfair to it because it doesn't have a star cast, but it's got a solid response. The film's going to be released in 25 cities in the U.S. and U.K. The foreign audience will see the director's cut. The Indian censors imposed 42 audio cuts, which was tragic because I really wanted to suggest power and violence through language.

Girish: Do you feel its possible for independent films like yours to become more than isolated events? Is there an emerging distribution system for such films?

Dev: It's really a very difficult situation here. I think there's money available. But there aren't enough young film-makers who are willing to come out and do something new and different; there's very little independent cinema happening here at all. Everybody either drifts into television or Bollywood because they see those as systems that work, though the percentage of failures in Bollywood is actually phenomenal. But I think the trade will change. An alternate system is emerging that will allow a different kind of film to be made.